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# A Century of Symphony: Bowling Green Western Symphony Orchestra

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## **A Century of Symphony** by Jonathan Jeffrey

Music is the only thing which is suitable on all occasions. Music has its lesson in war and in peace, in merriment and in sadness, at Creation and at Death. There is no time nor place, when a song is not in order.

*Western Kentucky State Normal Bulletin*, February 1907

In 1946, Robert Spiller stepped on Western Kentucky State Teachers College's campus for the first time as an incoming freshman. Hailing from distant Bromall, Pennsylvania, Spiller came to Western to study in the pre-veterinary program. It didn't take him long to fill his days with studies and community activities. He had musical experience, so he played the piano and led singing in his Sunday School class at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, where he also sang in the congregation's choir. While attending high school in Bromall, Spiller had enjoyed playing bass viola in a string ensemble. This was an activity that he wanted to continue at the collegiate level, so he soon found himself part of the Western Orchestra, playing under the capable leadership of Weldon Hart. Spiller found the music challenging, and it allowed him to blend into the college scene and to meet people in the community. Sixty years later, Spiller has come full circle. Having retired from military service and returned to Bowling Green, he now supports the local Orchestra financially and with his attendance. This reciprocity benefits everyone. Many arts organizations do not survive long enough to enjoy such long term relationships.

In 2008 the Bowling Green-Western Symphony Orchestra (BGWSO) celebrates a century of providing learning opportunities for student and community musicians as well as entertaining and educating the public about the joys of orchestral music. What many modern concert attendees may not realize is that this one hundred year tenure makes the

BGWSO perhaps the oldest continuously operating symphony orchestra in the Commonwealth. Although its heritage is not absent of struggling moments, the BGWSO today is a true town-gown triumph. The Orchestra receives widespread community support and the subsistence of Western Kentucky University (WKU), and indeed its history is indelibly linked with the development of Western's music department.

Bowling Green was fertile ground for the development of an orchestra at the turn of the 20th century. Local music lovers did not lack musical performances to attend. Indeed, the Boston Symphony Orchestra performed in Odeon Hall (the Opera House) in 1890, and musical entertainments of a wide variety were held frequently in local churches, lecture and school halls, and private homes. To abet musical development in the community, the Bowling Green Musical Fund Society was organized on April 11, 1872, and its list of charter members boasted 86 of the community's most influential denizens. The society's stated mission was "the cultivation of music and the social enjoyment of its members." Male society members paid \$10 annually to remain in good standing; ladies paid \$5. "First class members consist[ed] of those who take part in musical exercises" and second class members were "non performers." The Society maintained a hall for their Monday night meetings, although its location is unknown today. The director of this august group was Professor W.F. Kouwenberg (1839-1930), a Dutch immigrant to the United States who at one time taught piano at the Potter College for Young Ladies. Later he became the first organist at St. Joseph's Catholic Church and helped organized that church's first choir. He also taught piano, violin, and voice lessons.

Cognizant of the need to cultivate musical interest at a young age, Professor Kouwenberg initiated a "juvenile class" for musicians in which his pupils "in a short time

[were] analyzing, writing and reading music.” Graduates acknowledged that Kouwenberg’s “very thorough training instilled into them the rudiments of music without which they could not appreciate the fine music they would be compelled to listen to in the ordinary course of life.”<sup>1</sup> His students performed in numerous programs including an 1876 Amateur Club presentation of the "Oratorio of Daniel" at Odeon Hall which included "twenty-five voices well trained and a full orchestral accompaniment." One journalist deemed it a "superior musical entertainment."<sup>2</sup>

Kouwenberg was soon hired to teach music at the new Southern Normal School, a private teachers college that had moved to Bowling Green from Glasgow in 1884. When the Cherry brothers--Henry Hardin and Thomas Crittenden--purchased the school in 1892, they attempted to bolster the school's musical offerings, but they were often on the verge of financial doom and could not afford to stretch the school's meager resources beyond the rudimentary courses.

After operating the school for almost a decade with only a small measure of financial success, H.H. Cherry became involved in the effort to pass legislation that would create two regional normal schools, or teacher colleges, in Kentucky. The General Assembly passed this legislation, and the governor signed it in March 1906. Richmond and Bowling Green were selected as the sites for the institutions. Both communities offered previously established schools that could be easily adapted to the normal school format. The promise of state support motivated Cherry to champion the legislation.

On January 17, 1907, the first classes of the Western Kentucky State Normal School (WKSNS) were held in the building that had housed the Southern Normal School

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<sup>1</sup> *Bowling Green Times Gazette*, 18 June 1884.

<sup>2</sup> *Bowling Green Democrat*, 4 March 1876.

at the corner of College and Thirteenth Streets (presently the location of Bowling Green Towers). The WKSNS's first catalog, published in November 1906, listed only four music classes: Common School Music—Methods & Training, Sight Singing, Piano, and Voice. The faculty, consisting of W.L. Gebhart and Irene Russell, encouraged students to participate in various performance ensembles, including the Choral Society, the Glee Club, and the Normal School Orchestra. The catalog noted: "It is the purpose of the Normal School to develop a first-class orchestra. Rehearsals will be held for the purpose of studying the best orchestral works." Gebhart's credentials are rather nebulous; the catalog claimed that he had "extensive" experience as conductor of choruses, glee clubs, and orchestras. Miss Russell had studied under a number of impressive pianists both domestically and abroad.<sup>3</sup>

During the Normal's first year of operation, 275 students, many of them future teachers, enrolled in music courses. The 1907 catalog announced that: "An orchestra of eight instruments has been organized and is practicing regularly. If you play an orchestral instrument, bring yours with you. There will be no extra charges for practice or playing. Lessons can be gotten at very reasonable rates. Anyone taking lessons will be admitted to the orchestra as soon as he is able to play."<sup>4</sup> Western administrators wanted to encourage the growth of the music program; their budget request to the General Assembly in 1907 suggested a special appropriation of \$600 for the music department of which \$250 was earmarked "to purchase a new piano for the music room."

In 1908 the fledgling Normal employed the services of Pauline Drake, a local violinist who had studied under Professor Kouwenberg. She taught private violin lessons

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<sup>3</sup> *State Normal Bulletin*, Nov. 1906, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *State Normal Bulletin*, Nov. 1907, p. 6.

for fifty cents per session; the school also compensated her "\$150 annually for extra service in developing an Orchestra and a Band for the institution." Cherry reported to the school's Board of Regents in 1908 that: "Considerable successful work has already been done along this line. We very much desire a good Orchestra and Band, as they will be of great service to the institution."<sup>5</sup> Within a year the school's catalog was crowing about Miss Drake's progress, noting: "The Normal School Orchestra under Miss Pauline Drake as Director is growing in proficiency and earnestness. A very high grade work is being done. It is composed of the following pieces: 3 First Violins, 2 Second Violins, Clarinet, Flute, Cello, Drum, Double Bass Violin, Cornet and Piano. The Orchestra adds much to the literary programs rendered in Vanmeter Hall from time to time."<sup>6</sup>

The Normal made a bold move in the summer of 1909, when Cherry hired William Alfred White to become the new "director of the School of Music." Professor White, an accomplished musician and educator, had written several musical textbooks and was a frequent contributor to the music education literature. He came to Bowling Green from teaching at his alma mater, Syracuse University. In addition to his impressive credentials, White was a young man that Cherry undoubtedly believed would have a long and successful tenure in building the music program at Western. The catalog, which most assuredly was penned by Cherry, noted: "Notwithstanding his long and varied experience Mr. White comes to our local institution still a young man in the prime of his powers, for he is still considerably less than forty years of age."<sup>7</sup> Although he only stayed at Western for one year, White instituted a schedule of concerts which included

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<sup>5</sup> Board of Regent Minutes, 21 July 1908.

<sup>6</sup> *State Normal Bulletin*, Feb. 1909, p. 8. The Vanmeter Hall mentioned here was the auditorium of the old Southern Normal School. Literature of the period indicates that the Hall could seat 700; it was used by the school for chapel services.

<sup>7</sup> *State Normal Bulletin*, Aug. 1909, p. 36.

both vocal and instrumental music, but the programs concentrated on solo and small ensemble performances. The first program that has survived from that era that featured the Normal School Orchestra is dated November 9, 1909. The group performed "Attacque des Uhlans" ("Charge of the Uhlans") by Carl Bohm and "Over the Waves" by Juventino Rosas. Undoubtedly the Orchestra had performed publicly before, but no documentation survives to authenticate that fact.

Before leaving Western, Professor White oversaw the move of the School of Music to the school's new property atop College Hill. Western purchased the property of the defunct Potter College for Young Ladies in May 1909. The official move up the hill occurred two years later, following the completion of the Administration Building (now Van Meter Hall). The new campus afforded a grand opportunity for the School of Music, because it contained a commodious stone house located some distance from the chief classroom building. Built for Potter College's president, Benjamin F. Cabell, the house was constructed of rough ashlar Bowling Green limestone. A 1909 Western publication noted that "the location of the [Music] school is now permanently in its own building, known formerly as Cabell Hall, hereafter to be known as the Music Building."<sup>8</sup> The new building furnished the music program with an opportunity to grow.

President Cherry and the Board of Regents were definitely interested in the growth of the School of Music, because it was one of the few areas within the institution that actually generated funds. Professor White was initially the only salaried individual in

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<sup>8</sup> *State Normal Bulletin*, Nov. 1909, p. 6. The Music Department later shared the building with the Domestic Science Department (Home Economics). Cabell Hall was literally taken apart in 1926, when that location was selected as the site for Western's new library (now Gordon Wilson Hall). Louisville architect, Brinton B. Davis, utilized the salvage from Cabell Hall to construct the new Home Economics Building. That building was razed in 1982, but a portion of its basement wall and much of the building stone was used to build a retaining wall that still stands near the Helm Library and the Industrial Arts Building.

the School of Music; the other teachers--all women--taught private lessons and generated enough funds to pay their salaries. In addition the school benefited from the rental of practice pianos. Despite what appeared to be a successful music program on paper, problems were obviously stewing in Cabell Hall. During their March 1909 meeting, the Board of Regents evidently expressed some concern about that School's development and "ordered that Dr. Cherry be authorized and empowered to reorganize the School of Music and to make the same more systematic and effective and that he be authorized to employ such musical instructors as in his judgment may be necessary."<sup>9</sup> White left in May 1910, and Cherry initiated a search through a Nashville talent agency to find a replacement.

Cherry worked quickly. Within a month he had narrowed the number of candidates to two: Franz J. Strahm, who was director of the Tennessee Academy of Music in Nashville, and Signor Nino Fernando Titamo, professor of music and orchestra conductor at the Alabama Normal College in Tuscaloosa. Both were viable candidates and had excellent references, but Cherry had seen Strahm in action at a May Music Festival in Nashville. What Cherry observed, he liked—a man brimming with energy, an animated conductor with charisma, and a musician comfortable in leading both instrumental and vocal performances. Like any good talent, Professor Strahm also came at a price. The talent agency wrote Cherry in June that Strahm had offered his services to Western for \$2200. The agency pointed out "that at this figure he is one of the least expensive men you will have in your faculty. He is really worth \$3000, and we are positive he will be able to demonstrate that he is worth this to the Normal. His personal character should be considered in deciding this matter, upon this point we have absolute conviction, for we have known him well for a number of years, and he has fully

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<sup>9</sup> Board of Regents Meetings, 31 Mar. 1910.



established himself in the confidence and esteem of church people here and elsewhere. As a musician he is decidedly one of the strongest we have in the South and his enthusiasm in his work, and his determination to build up a strong music school wherever he goes, fully convince us that he is the man you seek."<sup>10</sup> The agency knew what motivated Cherry; he wanted a take charge, talented executive for the School of Music, who could set things in order and build a regional, if not national, reputation for the school. Cherry told Strahm that he expected the new School of Music head to "develop as rapidly as possible all of the different branches of Music, including Instrumental Music, Voice Culture, Public School Music, the Oratorio, Choruses, Quartette, Orchestra, Band, etc., etc." The new Music Department head would also facilitate all music for the Normal's daily chapel services.<sup>11</sup>

The one area in which the agency, Strahm, and Cherry could not quickly agree was salary. Cherry was notorious for asking for the most but paying the least. It was clear that the agency had high salary expectations for their talent. Strahm met with Cherry in late July, and the president offered him \$1800 annually for his services. Most faculty of the time period began at a salary of \$1500, but even Cherry recognized that musical performances demanded many hours outside the classroom in making arrangements and in rehearsals. Strahm politely told the desperate Cherry that he would not come for less than \$2000. The agency again intervened, writing Cherry and explaining "we do not believe you cannot afford to allow the \$200 to prevent your getting a man who is eminently fitted for the work, and who has in him the qualities that will redound to the credit of the Normal. It is our candid opinion that you ought to call him up by phone at

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<sup>10</sup> J.W. Blair to Henry H. Cherry, 30 July 1910, Box 33, Folder 7, Cherry Papers, University Archives, Western Kentucky University (hereafter referred to as UA).

<sup>11</sup> H.H. Cherry to Franz Strahm, 1 August 1910, Box 33, Folder 7, Cherry Papers, UA.

Monteagle and close with him at \$2000."<sup>12</sup> Cherry knew when he couldn't win his penurious gamble; he contacted Strahm and said they had a deal.

Once Strahm accepted the contract, Cherry immediately asked for a photograph and "any literature which you have that will enable us to speak of you from time to time" including "a brief record, giving your educational rating, where you were trained, experience, etc." He also chanted for Strahm the mantra he droned to most incoming faculty: "I want to say to you that you will enter an educational fraternity when you enter the Western Normal. Every teacher and every student will give your department their deep and sympathetic cooperation and aid you in every possible way. All of us are going to stand for you and work for your success. We want the Western Kentucky School of Music to be the best in the South. We are ready to help you to make it the best. You can count on us."<sup>13</sup> This was Cherry's way of saying: I will help you in any way I can, and the faculty and staff will abet your efforts, but we are expecting results. Seldom have two men so completely understood each other, for Cherry was to find Strahm an indefatigable instructor with a deep inner drive to give his best and to demand excellence from his students. Strahm wrote Cherry that he must finish his summer duties at Monteagle, but to expect him on campus in early September, where "I expect to put my whole heart and soul in my work."<sup>14</sup>

Once on campus, Strahm began his work in earnest. Although he had taught private lessons, played instruments, and conducted, he had not taught in a classroom setting. Preparing class lectures was no doubt a daunting task. Despite any initial shortcomings in the classroom, the campus community quickly warmed to Strahm. They

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<sup>12</sup> J.W. Blair to H.H. Cherry, 30 July 1910, Box 33, Folder 7, Cherry Papers, UA.

<sup>13</sup> H.H. Cherry to Franz Strahm, 1 Aug. 1910, Box 33, Folder 7, Cherry Papers, UA.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Strahm to H.H. Cherry, 27 Aug. 1910, Box 1, Folder 24, Cherry Papers, UA.

were initially impressed by the fine reputation that he brought to their campus. Strahm was born into a musical family consisting of twenty-four children; both his father and older sister were accomplished musicians. He studied at the Church Music School at Freiburg, Baden, with the Reverend G. Schweitzer, a well-know Catholic composer. He also studied under William Popp, who later became the director of the Vienna Conservatory. With this well-balanced training, Strahm entered the Royal Conservatory of Music at Sondershausen, where he studied under Carl Schroeder, Alfred Reisenauer and Adolph Schultze; he also studied briefly under Franz Liszt. After completing his training, he secured a position as violin player in the Royal Court Orchestra at Sonderhausen. He immigrated to the United States in 1891, answering an advertisement concerning musicians for a Nashville theater orchestra.

Between 1891 and 1910, Strahm developed an enviable musical resume in Nashville. He played in all types of musical venues and eventually was called upon to conduct large music ensembles. He also was employed as the organist and choir director at Nashville's Woodland Street Presbyterian Church and taught at the Nashville Academy of Music. Strahm's public accolades were legion. The *Nashville Tennessean* reaction after a May Music Festival performance was not unusual for Strahm:

Too many things cannot be said of Franz J. Strahm. He was omnipresent last night. He was everything; he did everything. He conducted the orchestra; he played the accompaniments on the piano; he moved the piano; he planned, designed, worked to make the festival possible, and he aided very largely in its execution. The opinion of the audience last night was that his superior as a

conductor has seldom, if ever been seen here. He brought the very best out of the magnificent orchestra in front of him. He achieved wonderful effects.

As one enthusiastic music-lover put it last night, "He has done more for the musical advancement of Nashville than any other one person in the city."<sup>15</sup>

There is no doubt that Strahm exhibited the characteristics that Cherry desired in any of the faculty taking leadership positions at Western: talent balanced with an outstanding work ethic.

In addition to the stellar reputation Strahm brought to campus, the German's colorful character soon endeared him to students, faculty, and the community. He loved being around young people and was often the brunt of their jokes which poked fun at his heavy German brogue. This did not faze him, and indeed he often told self-deprecating stories about himself. At one operetta practice, Franz is said to have shouted: "You Altos, Vy don't you zing? Open your mouths and throw yourselves in!"<sup>16</sup> He was also known to consume copious amounts of beer, to smoke cigars, and to dance, propensities that could easily have garnered community scorn. Although pleasantly rotund, Strahm participated in the annual chestnut hunts, relays, and even umpired impromptu baseball games. The campus community both respected and loved Franz Strahm, and the maestro fell in love with teaching.

Strahm had a heavy teaching load, instructing classes in advanced piano, music history, music theory, and the most popular of the Normal's courses in his discipline, Public School Music. He also had the responsibility of re-organizing and conducting the school's Orchestra. Under his leadership the Orchestra oversaw a series of "first-class

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted in the *State Normal Bulletin*, Nov. 1910, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Lowell H. Harrison's *Western Kentucky University* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1987): 22-23.

concerts and performances." The Orchestra was noted as having "a full augmented String Quintette, Flute, two Clarionettes, two Cornettes, Trombone, Drums, [and] Piano."

Although small, the musical ensemble contained all the instruments necessary to qualify as an orchestra: brass, woodwinds, strings, and percussion. With the help of Pauline Drake, Strahm was preparing other string students to merge into the fledgling Orchestra. In addition to Strahm, the School of Music employed a voice teacher, and piano and violin instructors.

Besides maintaining a heavy teaching schedule, Strahm accomplished two important things in the fall of 1910 that endeared him to the students at the Western Normal. Sometime in the late fall of 1910, he composed the *Normal March*; it was soon adopted as the school song and was played frequently during chapel services. "We feel safe in saying," the school paper asserted, "that within a few months its rendition will move a Normal audience, as the rendition of *Dixie* moves a southern one."<sup>17</sup> When the school had its first chapel service after moving to its new hilltop campus on a cold February day, Strahm played the "*Normal March* which meant, to the heart of every teacher present, the onward march of education in Kentucky."<sup>18</sup> Also in the fall of 1910, Strahm organized the Oratorio Society. Oratorio performances were a musical fad of the Victorian Era, although they had existed for over three hundred years. Oratorios are musical compositions for voices and orchestra and generally tell a sacred story without costumes, scenery or dramatics of any kind. They rely strictly on played and sung music. The first performance of the Normal's Oratorio Society took place in the new Van Meter Auditorium on Thanksgiving evening, November 24, 1910. In addition to the two

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<sup>17</sup> *Elevator*, Dec. 1910, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Elevator*, Mar. 1911, p. 104.

oratorio choruses which were "the special features of the occasion, the orchestra rendered a few popular numbers, [and] Prof. Strahm played several selections in his characteristic way. The Oratorio Society" noted the school paper, "is thoroughly alive and we predict great things for it in the future."<sup>19</sup>

It didn't take long for Strahm to make good on this prediction. He had grandiose visions for a May music festival in Bowling Green much like the ones in which he had participated while in Nashville and back in his native Germany. When the spring semester started, Strahm announced that the Oratorio Society would perform Louis Spohr's *Last Judgement* (1825) in May. The Oratorio's singers consisted of both students and community participants, the mixture being about half and half. The Orchestra practiced with the Society, but Strahm had plans to bring in professional musicians from Nashville to play for the group during the actual performances. Strahm was also going to import professionals to fill the vocal solo parts.

Strahm worked the local singers and orchestra hard in preparing for the event. He also spent an untold number of hours making sure that everything ran smoothly. Fortunately, the new Van Meter Auditorium which could uncomfortably seat about 1200 (publicity said it could seat 1800) had been completed in March. Although the college Orchestra was not participating, they were allowed to attend the festival for free in order to see professional musicians in action. The soloists included nationally renowned soprano Marie Zimmerman of New York City; Mrs. Fred Mutchler, alto, of Bowling Green; Charles C. Washburn, basso, from Nashville; and Walter Earnest, tenor, of Pittsburgh. Of equal interest to the home crowd was the 175-voice chorus which included many of their friends, neighbors and associates. Over 1000 people crowded Van Meter

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<sup>19</sup> *Elevator*, Dec. 1910, p. 31.

Auditorium for the May 12th performance, and most pronounced "it one of the greatest programs ever rendered in the city." The school newspaper declared that the "success of the Oratorio Society is due largely to our able leader, Franz Strahm."<sup>20</sup>

Strahm basked in the adulation, but he did not rest on past achievements. He left Bowling Green in mid-summer of 1911 to take over his responsibilities as the Director of Music for the Monteagle Sunday School Assembly. Throughout the summer thousands of people attended religious training programs coupled with entertainment at Monteagle, a Chautauqua-like program and facility in southeastern Tennessee. That summer, Strahm wrote a telling letter to President Cherry in which he opined:

If I shall tell you the truth I am homesick, homesick to be back in Bowling Green upon the beautiful hill, looking far away in the country and being with my class...I feel all the time like I [ought] to be with you. I never dreamed that I could get so attached to teaching class work. My idea and what I gathered from other people was that class teaching was a terrible kind of work, drudgery, and really President Cherry I love it. It feel[s] like I am doing some work in my profession and I love to be with my classes; somehow it seems to me like they are my children even if some of them are nearly my age.<sup>21</sup>

Strahm continued to spend a good portion of the next seven summers leading the musical programs at Monteagle, but his mind was ever on the Normal hill, planning how he could help the School of Music to become "a real credit to the State of Kentucky, and

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<sup>20</sup> *Elevator*, May 1911, p. 160.

<sup>21</sup> Franz Strahm to H.H. Cherry, 9 July 1911, Box 2, Folder 7, Cherry Papers, UA.

ultimately to make it the equal of any School of Music in the country."<sup>22</sup> He also used the numerous contacts he made at Monteagle to bring exciting musical celebrities to campus.

When Strahm returned to Western in September 1911, he again envisioned the hill hosting a full-fledged May Music Festival. For the Oratorio Society's second public performance, Strahm selected Haydn's *The Creation*. They practiced throughout the year, preparing for their May 1912 performance. Strahm brought in featured instrumental musicians from the Orpheum Theatre Orchestra of Memphis to assist with the concert. This is the first program that actually lists the members of the Orchestra, and yes the concertmaster and at least seven other members are unfamiliar names, but the rest of the Orchestra definitely consisted of talented locals that probably enjoyed the chance to play with music professionals from a metropolitan area. By this time, Strahm had undoubtedly learned a few things from H.H. Cherry, a public relations wunderkind. The program from the 1912 concert is larger, and the advertisement for Baldwin pianos no doubt meant that the company underwrote a portion of the event's expenses as well as supplied pianos for the affair. Strahm also prepared pre-concert mailers encouraging ticket purchases prior to the event. Tickets to the Oratorio were \$1, and attendees of the afternoon orchestra concert paid a quarter. [GOOD PLACE TO POSSIBLY INSERT THE POEM FOUND AT THE START OF THIS PAPER] Strahm also printed posters to advertise the event, and the local press publicized the concert heavily.<sup>23</sup>

Strahm's hard work paid dividends. Attendance increased, and people began to plan their calendars around the Western Normal's May Music Festival. Even Western's Board of Regents commended Strahm with a formal resolution in which they noted: "We feel that

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<sup>22</sup> *Normal School Bulletin*, Nov. 1910, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> The program can be found in Box 1, Folder 3 of the Franz Strahm Collection, UA



the May Festival concerts given at this time to the public, have been of a kind to do credit to a larger community and an older educational institution and that their importance in the effect upon the student body is of the greatest value."<sup>24</sup> Strahm now had a system in place, and he spent the next decade perfecting it. The Festival finally became a three-day event, with ticketed concerts. As many as 3000 people attended the three-day fetes, and many of the concert goers came from out-of-town. The Orchestra played a prominent role in the Festivals; Strahm brought in professional musicians from Nashville, Memphis or Indianapolis to lead the Orchestra, but his best students and community members always played an integral role. The only year that local instrumental talent did not participate in the Festival's Orchestra was 1919, when the Russian Symphony Orchestra of New York accompanied all the concerts for the three-day event.

Western's last May Music Festival took place in 1925; many oratorios were given on Western's campus during the 1920s and 1930s, but they rarely again involved bringing in "foreign" talent. By 1925 Western's Music Department and the local Woman's Music Club were able to fill the majority of the vocal and instrumental talent necessary to put on such productions thus precluding a financial drain on the institution. Certainly during the Great Depression extra funds for such events were not available at Western. By the mid-1930s the public was also losing its passion for oratorios, as popular band music began being played on improved radios. Also, Strahm had less time to devote to extracurricular events as he was burdened with the task of administering the hill's ever growing music program. The Festivals certainly cemented Strahm's musical reputation both at Western and throughout the upland South.

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<sup>24</sup> Board of Regents Minutes, 9 May 1912.

Strahm busied himself in the summer of 1912 at Monteagle overseeing its musical program and searching for new personnel for Western. In a long letter to President Cherry that summer, Strahm discussed personnel issues. He also voiced a loyalty to the school that undoubtedly pleased the president. He told Cherry:

It is strange Pres. Cherry how many people do really not know what a magnificent school we have. Several parties here have asked me how Potter College is getting along and how I like it! When I tell them that Potter College is past, but the greatest school in this country has taken its place they look so amazed. I am advertising our school all day long.<sup>25</sup>

Cherry certainly appreciated Strahm's hard work and told him so in an amazingly tender letter in 1917. "The work you are doing," asserted Cherry, "and the life you are living should be a fire within your soul that would become a reward beyond all things material, and an inspiration that would make you feel that all this effort that is costing flesh, blood and spirit is worthwhile. Your noble co-workers appreciate every inch of you."<sup>26</sup> Cherry was talking both about Strahm's dedicated work on the hill, and the patriotic fervor that Strahm exhibited towards the United States during World War I. This was not an easy time to be a German immigrant in the United States. Strahm's son, Victor, would soon begin serving in the United States Army, where he would become a flying ace. Despite the difficulties of the time, Strahm's perseverance and his connections assisted him in building a strong and talented faculty. Many of them did not possess the pride, talent, or stamina of their fearless leader, but they were nevertheless dedicated to their work. Despite the demise of the Music Festivals after 1925, Strahm continued to use his

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<sup>25</sup> Franz Strahm to H.H. Cherry, 6 Aug. 1912, Box 2, Folder 16, Cherry Papers, UA.

<sup>26</sup> H.H. Cherry to Franz Strahm, 28 Feb. 1917, Box 3, Folder 26, Cherry Papers, UA.

network of contacts to bring outstanding, nationally recognized musical artists of all varieties to the hill. He was assisted in this endeavor by Will B. Hill, who ran a music store for several years in downtown Bowling Green. Hill eventually became the public relations director for Western. He ardently supported musical programming on the hill, and for many years served as Oratorio Society's president.

The College Orchestra was not Strahm's chief concern during the 1920s. It did play frequently for the Normal's chapel services and appeared regularly on Western musical programs, but it did not have dedicated concerts at which only the Orchestra played. The Orchestra generally accompanied a vocal group or performed opening and closing numbers for musical programs involving other ensembles and soloists. The reason for this is unclear, but it is entirely possible that the Orchestra did not meet Strahm's standards for public performance. When playing in public venues, such as at the Music Festivals, Strahm always included extremely talented community members and only his best students. Instrumental students were undoubtedly encouraged to play in the Orchestra, but they did not earn credit hours for their participation. A class, "The School Orchestra," was part of the curriculum, but it was a course in leading an orchestra in the public school not a performance class. The Orchestra probably also suffered from lack of sufficient practice space. No area on the second floor of Cabell Hall would have been adequate for a 25- or 30-member orchestra to practice; they would have had to use Van Meter Auditorium for this work, and it was frequently used for things other than chapel services.

Practice space was no longer an issue when the Music Department moved into new facilities in the fall of 1926. The building was a house formerly owned by Elizabeth

Thomas and constructed of local limestone. It was purchased in the spring of 1926 and renovated; a large practice room--sometimes referred to as the Music Hall Auditorium--was added to the rear of the building. Only one week after moving into the new Music Hall, the Orchestra, consisting of twenty-four members, practiced in the new building; the Orchestra now had an adequate practice facility. Also beginning in 1926, Western began giving a one-hour credit for participation in the band and/or the Orchestra; this hour credit could be earned for each semester the student played with either group. Another stroke of favor for the Orchestra occurred when the Board of Regents approved the purchase of a number of new and used instruments for the program.<sup>27</sup>

The Orchestra seemed to be riding a tide of momentum, and one would think it would soon be presenting concerts for the institution. It still played for chapel services and accompanied vocalists and groups, but the Orchestra did not headline its own concerts. One of the major reasons was its size. The Orchestra appears for the first time in Western's yearbook, *The Talisman*, in 1926; that year it contained twenty members. With new space and instruments, the Orchestra gradually grew in a slow but swelling *crescendo*.

1926	20 members
1927	24 members
1928	27 members
1929	30 members

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<sup>27</sup> *College Heights Herald*, 23 Nov. 1926, p. 1. When the Music Building was constructed in 1941, the old Music Hall was converted into living space. Many people remember this as "Diddle Dorm", where the basketball team roomed. The building was eventually razed in 1996. A small park currently occupies the site and the building is properly commemorated at that locaion as is Western's legendary basketball coach, Edgar A. Diddle. The stone arch that appeared on the front porch was reconstructed in the park. Board of Regents Minutes, 17 Dec. 1926.

1930

44 members

Strahm now had a larger base of musicians from which to choose, and the Orchestra matured into a well-rounded musical group. In 1926 the Orchestra contained only two woodwind instruments; by 1930 it boasted twelve. In addition the strings became more diversified with the addition of violas and a bass cello that year. When Elliot Orr joined the faculty in late-1927, he undoubtedly stymied the Orchestra's momentum. Orr was brought to Western to develop the band program, principally the concert and marching bands. He had participated in a regimental band during World War I, and had a background in band development. Orr was followed in 1932 by Doctor Robert D. Perry. Perry followed through on Orr's foundational work, and the concert band played its first solo concert in December 1932 with 84 players. It was another five years before the Orchestra attained this signal achievement.

Perry came to Western from Purdue University and had an outstanding educational background. He had degrees in mathematics, music, and education. The first Ph.D. to teach in the Music Department, Perry simultaneously taught math classes on the hill. He had worked with bands on both the high school and post-secondary levels.<sup>28</sup> He came to the hill to fill a large void left by Professor Strahm, who took a brief sabbatical in the summer and early fall of 1932.

Part of Strahm's sabbatical was spent in his native Germany. Upon his return he exhibited a heart malady, which a Memphis physician diagnosed as "angina pectoris", a condition he called "very serious, and generally fatal." The doctor wrote President Cherry

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<sup>28</sup> An interesting tidbit about Perry that deserves a footnote revolves around an invention he patented in 1936. It was a music typewriter that was eventually manufactured by the Remington Typewriter Company. The machine was similar to a regular typewriter except that musical characters composed the main keyboard instead of letters. Perry said the machine was invaluable to those responsible for preparing copies of music for band, orchestra and vocal groups. *Park City Daily News*, 4 May 1936.

and pleaded with him to send Strahm back to Memphis for proper care. "Not much can be done," the doctor warned, "in the way of treatment except to protect the patient from exertion or excitement and to try to effect a general improvement in his health by rest, diet and freedom from worry."<sup>29</sup> The doctor correctly deduced that Strahm would probably not rest once he returned to the hill. When writing back to the physician, Dr. Cherry paid a glowing tribute to Strahm. He called the musician "a great citizen and he has given to Kentucky a great life. When I think of the musical standards and appreciation that existed in this State at the time he came here many years ago and then when I think of the present appreciation of music I find myself with an increasing appreciation for the noble service he has given the Commonwealth."<sup>30</sup> Cherry was unable to persuade Strahm to take a vacation to recover, but the musician took seriously the admonition to slow down. Perry was able to shoulder more and more of the responsibilities within the music department, and he generally served as conductor for all band concerts.

Although the band had a decided advantage in terms of size, by 1937 Western's Orchestra was poised to headline its own public concert. It then consisted of nearly fifty members. The program selected for this important concert consisted of modern and classical music. The modern portion of the program, conducted by Doctor Perry, consisted of two pieces by Ferde Grofe and "American Bolero" by Nacio Herb Brown. After an intermission, Strahm conducted the classical compositions which included Tchaikovsky's Dance Russe Trepak and Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in C Minor.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Carl E. Barber to H.H. Cherry, Oct. 19, 1932, Box 19, Folder 10, Cherry Papers, UA.

<sup>30</sup> H.H. Cherry to Carl E. Barber, Oct. 24, 1932, Box 19, Folder 10, Cherry Papers, UA.

<sup>31</sup> The program can be found in the "Music-Event Programs, 1936-1939," folder in the "Program Collection", UA 68/9, UA.

The Sunday afternoon concert was a decided success, but it was still several years before the Orchestra was consistently giving annual concerts of its own. It did continue to be an important musical group on campus, but the band program was decidedly more successful. It is interesting to note that no Orchestra appears in the 1935 to 1938 *Talismans*; the band is present, but the Orchestra is conspicuously missing. By this time dance "orchestras" were the rage, and this was the era when Western's Red and Grey Orchestra was the talk of the town; this group does appear in the *Talisman* from 1935 to 1938. Despite this oversight, the Orchestra continued to play and even had a concert broadcast over Louisville radio station WHAS in March of 1939.

Several other internal changes were occurring within the Music Department that affected the Orchestra. In the spring of 1937, the Board of Regents had asked President Cherry to investigate the possibility of obtaining funding from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federal New Deal program that employed people in public construction projects, for a music building. The proposal received WPA approval, and the Board signed a contract with Bowling Green architect, James M. Ingram, to present plans for the 20,000 square foot building and to supervise its construction. After some problems with contractors, the building was completed and ready for use in the spring of 1940. The three-story building was of masonry construction with a rough rubble limestone veneer. The first floor was dedicated to rehearsal space for the band, Orchestra, and other ensemble activities; the second floor was reserved for vocal training; and the third floor contained traditional classrooms and offices. The building also boasted thirteen practice rooms and a small recording studio. "The music building," asserted the

school newspaper, “is one of the finest to be found on any college campus in the country.”<sup>32</sup>

Besides having a new home, the Music Department was also undergoing administrative changes. Part of these adjustments were necessitated by Franz Strahm’s health and age. In June 1937, Dr. Cherry wrote Strahm a rather stern letter in which he informed the aging musician that he needed him to teach a full load at least through the following year. At that time, Cherry would entertain Strahm’s partial retirement. Strahm obviously wanted to continue to teach piano on a part-time basis, but he was eager to devote more of his time to “production of musical compositions.” Cherry also informed Strahm that he wanted “to employ one of the most outstanding men of this country as head of the music department. I may not be able to get the individual I want, but I shall make a most earnest effort.”<sup>33</sup> The following year Cherry hired Professor John N. Vincent to head the Music Department, relieving Strahm of his administrative duties. At the same time, Dr. Perry took over full responsibilities for the Orchestra. Thus, when the new Music Building was opened it did so under the aegis of a new administration in the Music Department. Correspondence of the period indicates that the transfer took place rather seamlessly. Franz Strahm was happy; he retired in 1940 after serving Western for 30 years. He had taken the fledgling Music Department and developed it into a regionally respected program and had provided the leadership for the evolution of a fine Orchestra. When history department head, Arndt Stickles, gave a eulogy for Strahm in 1941, he

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<sup>32</sup> The Music Building was located in the area near the old football stadium, close to the area now occupied by the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center. The total cost of the structure was approximately \$67,000; WPA funds covered approximately \$53,000 of that amount. When the old Music Hall was officially abandoned by the Music Department, Dr. Cherry had Western students who were being paid by the National Youth Administration (NYA) remodel the building into a dormitory. *College Heights Herald*, 5 June 1942.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from H.H. Cherry to Franz Strahm, 10 June 1937, Box 33, Folder 7, Cherry Papers, UA.



summarized the work of a great teacher: "As instructor, conductor, composer or pianist, he had the ability to take students where they stood in the field of his art and lead them ever to find themselves in action on an ascending scale."<sup>34</sup>

The Strahm era drew to a close with his death, but a new generation of faculty was poised to steer the Music Department's growth. This talented group included a gentleman that served as concertmaster for the Orchestra's first solo concert in 1937, Weldon Hart. He had come to Western in 1934 to teach music at the Training School. While serving in that capacity he also played with the Orchestra and composed music. Hart came to Western from a similar position at Peabody College, where he taught music in their Demonstration School. Before coming to Bowling Green, he also held first violin chair in the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. He had studied violin at Ward-Belmont Conservatory in Nashville, spent three years at Julliard, and received his Masters in Music from the University of Michigan in 1939. In addition to his conducting and playing abilities, Hart composed music and he had published several compositions prior to coming to Western. One of Hart's pieces *Tone Poem*, had actually been played by Western's Orchestra in 1933. Beginning in September 1939--just before the Music Building was completed--Hart was moved from the Training School to a full-time position in the Music Department and was placed in charge of the Orchestra. The first Orchestra concert under his baton took place in a chapel service on January 17, 1940. It was the beginning of a brief golden era for the Orchestra.

One of Hart's first ambitious projects was a festival concert, to which he invited many local high schools. At this event he conducted the 65-piece Western Orchestra in Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony in E Minor. This was a major event for the Orchestra, as

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<sup>34</sup> Stickles eulogy can be found in Box 1, Folder 2, Franz Strahm Collection, UA.

the local paper noted: “The presentation of this symphony marked a high point in the music department of Western Teachers College, for this is the first time that a symphony has ever been given in its entirety by the pupils of this institution.” The reviewer extolled the Orchestra’s work, declaring that it “had perfect understanding of the text—in fact, in certain passages one needed but to close his eyes to be assured that he was listening to the interpretation of one of the major orchestras.” She went on to add some cogent compliments regarding the Music Department’s leadership: “One wonders whether the music students of Western realize the opportunity that is theirs to be under the guidance of such music masters as Weldon Hart and John Vincent. And one wonders whether Bowling Green and Western Teachers College recognize their golden opportunity to build here a music school second to none in the State of Kentucky.”<sup>35</sup>

Over the next few years, Hart’s work was lauded locally as he conducted semi-annual concerts that now featured the Orchestra. After a March 1941 concert one local reviewer, who was known to not mete out compliments freely, effused: “Seldom is a town the size of Bowling Green privileged to hear a symphony program of the caliber of that presented by Weldon Hart and the Western College orchestra Monday night. Indeed, one could say without exaggeration that the performance rivaled those that are being given in much larger cities and by seasoned professionals. The youth and enthusiasm of the college musicians brought a freshness and energetic joy to the music that is many times lacking in the performance of professionals, who are prone to take their scores as routine duties.” She reserved her highest praise for the Orchestra’s rendition of Dvorak’s *New World Symphony* and Hart’s “discriminating reading of orchestral works.” She

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<sup>35</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 14 May 1940, p. 4. The local paper began using select members of the Bowling Green Woman’s Music Club, an accomplished group of women, to review local concerts.

astutely observed: “The orchestra has gone far in its development under his [Hart’s] guidance.” “As has been displayed in other previous concerts,” another reviewer applauded, “Mr. Hart showed the audience his ability to lead and direct an orchestra of symphonic proportions.” After another concert in November 1941, a reviewer concurred: “I could not keep from comparing yesterday’s rendition of the Schubert *Unfinished* with that of the same composition done by Western’s College orchestra before Mr. Hart took over. One has only to look back a very few years to find how orchestral music has gone forward under its present conductor.”<sup>36</sup> His students liked him also. One student who played under Hart described him as “outstanding” and added, “He tried to get every student to do the best they could and then thanked them for doing it.”<sup>37</sup>

Western’s Music Department was maturing. Department Head John Vincent announced in 1940 that Western had 100 music majors with hundreds of others taking classes to fulfill a minor in music, requirements toward other degrees particularly in education, or to pursue their personal pleasure or exhibit their particular musical ability. The 1939 catalog also, for the first time, noted that the one-hour credit course for Orchestra participation was now being graded into “Junior Orchestra” and “College Orchestra.” Although both courses were taught by Hart, it demonstrated a degree of sophistication in the Orchestra’s development. The prerequisite for the “College Orchestra” was the “ability to play some orchestral instrument satisfactorily.” This was decidedly different from earlier catalogs that had invited “all students who play a string or brass instrument...to join.” The catalog went on to describe the Orchestra class as “training in the art of ensemble playing” and would give students exposure to “the best

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 5 Mar. 1941 and 1 Dec. 1941; *College Heights Herald*, 14 Mar. 1941.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Robert Spiller, February 20, 2008.

orchestral literature.” It also noted that two or more performances by the Orchestra would be performed each year. “Junior Orchestra” could not be taken again for credit, but “College Orchestra” could be repeated each semester the student enrolled. Enhancing the Department’s library was a major emphasis for Vincent. He announced with pleasure that the Carnegie Corporation had donated “The Carnegie Music Set” to the Department in 1940. This collection consisted of 852 phonograph records which included 24 complete symphonies, 7 entire operas, 32 overtures, 28 concertos, 20 suites, over 100 choral works, as well as hundreds of other musical compilations. It also included a set of reference books, over 145 scores, a phonograph, a card index to the collection, and subscriptions to several music periodicals.<sup>38</sup>

The war years were difficult ones for most college campuses in the United States, and Western was no exception. The orchestra does appear in the *Talismans* for 1942 and 1943, but does not for 1944 or 1945. The school's enrollment in 1930 had been 4,253; in 1940 it dropped to 1,561; in 1941 it stood at 1,109; and in 1943 only 938 students enrolled during the entire year. During the winter quarter of 1944, only 403 students registered for classes at Western and 76.4 percent of them were women. It is entirely possible that no Orchestra existed during those trying years. Salaries also lagged, and at least one music professor felt that he should take this time to continue his education. Weldon Hart took a leave of absence in late-1943 to attend the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York.

Hart was a valued faculty member. Granting leaves of absence to faculty members who were obtaining terminal degrees, certificates, or other specialized training was not uncommon at Western. The school needed more Ph.D.'s in teaching positions,

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<sup>38</sup> *Western Kentucky State Teachers College Catalog*, 1939. *College Heights Herald*, 14 Mar. 1941.

and it seemed a reasonable gamble to grant a leave of absence in exchange for loyalty to the hill. Hart's wife, Mildred, worked as a dental assistant to pay the bills while the maestro honed his skills at composing and conducting at Eastman. His leave of absence was extended an additional year, and Hart returned to the hill in 1946. During his leave, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra had debuted Hart's Symphony No. 1, and a composition entitled *A Symphonic Movement* won first prize in a contest conducted by the National Composers Congress and was premiered by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for a national audience over the ABC radio network. In addition Hart's *Darling Cory* was featured in a concert presented by the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. While Hart was gone, the talented head of the Music Department, Dr. John N. Vincent, left for a similar position at UCLA, and Dr. Rudolph R. Willmann was named as acting head. Responsibilities for strings classes and the conducting of the Orchestra fell to a temporary instructor, William D. Alexander. In order to match a competing offer made to Hart from Colgate University in 1946, Dr. Paul L. Garrett, president of Western, offered Hart a position as head of the Music Department, which he readily accepted.<sup>39</sup>

Hart balanced his administrative, teaching, and conducting duties with great aplomb. Concurrently he finished his dissertation and composed. He truly enjoyed conducting and tried to bring balance to concerts, utilizing pieces from the classical repertoire but also incorporating modern compositions. For his first concert after returning to the hill, Hart chose pieces by Puccini, Schubert, and Beethoven, balanced with newer pieces by Barlow and Olliere. Within two years, even those outside of the Western family were complimenting the school's music program, facilities, and its department head. The *Courier-Journal* called Hart "one of the nation's most promising

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<sup>39</sup> "Hart, Weldon" correspondence found in Box 3, Folder 22, Paul L. Garrett Papers, UA.

young composers."<sup>40</sup> After playing with the Western Orchestra, nationally recognized cellist, Luigi Silva, said: "Western's music department is the best of any college in this area I have visited or have had connection with." He credited this to Hart, whom Silva pronounced "one of the outstanding young directors and composers in the United States."<sup>41</sup> Hart made sure that the Orchestra played a leading role in the department's programming, by instituting semi-annual concerts that focused on increasingly difficult orchestral pieces and by having the Orchestra play with nationally recognized soloists. Concurrently, Hart wisely continued in the tradition of Professors Strahm and Perry by encouraging talented community members to participate in the Orchestra. An important measure of the Department's success in this era was its acceptance into the National Association of Schools of Music as an associate member. At the time, this organization was composed of only 200 music schools and departments in the United States.

Hart's reputation broadened as his compositions began to be played more frequently by major symphonies. During his tenure at Western, Hart also conducted the Louisville Philharmonic Orchestra on several occasions. With the musician's increasing recognition, President Garrett soon realized that a talent of Hart's caliber would be difficult to retain. In 1949 Hart left Bowling Green to assume the role of music department chairman at the University of West Virginia. He stayed in that post until he accepted the department head position at Michigan State University in 1957.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Courier-Journal*, 3 Aug. 1947.

<sup>41</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 9 Apr. 1948.

<sup>42</sup> Physically ill, Hart committed suicide on November 20, 1957. He was another major music talent that had been associated with Western's Orchestra.

Hart's departure left a huge void that was soon filled by Dr. Hugh Gunderson, who had already been leading the school's band program.<sup>43</sup> Gunderson conducted the Orchestra from 1950 to 1952 when it grew to over 60 players. He advertised the Orchestra as "a non-selective group made up of members of the music department who qualify by their proficiency in playing an instrument. They meet twice a week in preparation for the three concerts they present each year."<sup>44</sup> The conductor also continued the tradition of utilizing community talent in the Orchestra. For three years, Gunderson was blessed with a fine violinist who served as concertmaster, Adon Foster. In 1953 Foster was hired as temporary conductor; that same year a new faculty member, Bennie P. Beach yielded the conductor's baton for a concert. The following year Dr. Howard Carpenter assumed full responsibility for the Orchestra. Carpenter, more than any other conductor up to that time, emphasized the egalitarian nature of Western's Orchestra. "Ability to play an orchestral instrument," he once wrote, "is the only prerequisite to becoming a member of the College Orchestra. The status of the individual—whether he be a member of the faculty, a music-loving citizen of the town, or a versatile chemistry student—matters not in the hands of the conductor, who wields the group into a unit flexible to his expressive baton."<sup>45</sup> Carpenter also composed music, and the Orchestra's concerts occasionally included original scores composed by this versatile musician. Original composition was heavily emphasized during this period in Western's Music Department, and the Orchestra also debuted several student compositions at its concerts.

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<sup>43</sup> Dr. Hugh Gunderson served on Western's music faculty from 1940 until 1957, and served as the head of the department from 1949 until 1957. His doctorate in music was from the University of Iowa. Gunderson left Western to assume a teaching position at the University of Toledo, where he also directed the university band.

<sup>44</sup> *Talisman*, 1953, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1954, p. 78.

Many musical events of the 1950s and 1960s at Western featured original music by talented faculty such as Benny Beach, David Livingston (an alumni of Western's music department), and Howard Carpenter. The strings program also reached a new level of proficiency during this era, and the department sponsored two small faculty ensembles that helped enhance the school's reputation in the region, the Pennyrile String Quartet—consisting of Betty K. Pease (violin), Thomas J. Stone (violin), Howard Carpenter (viola), and June Thaden (cellist)—and the Western Kentucky Chamber Ensemble. Other student ensemble groups were also formalized in these decades; the large Wind Ensemble was actually featured in the *Talisman* for several years in the 1960s. All of these applied music venues helped abet the Orchestra's development.

Despite the Orchestra's sustained success, the facilities where it practiced were not being properly maintained. Toward the end of the 1950s, it became increasingly apparent that renovations were needed for the Music Hall. The changes were not comprehensive, but they were important to the faculty and students. One of the most significant alterations was transforming the old back garage doors into the building's new entrance. The work also included further soundproofing, new toilet facilities, flooring, light fixtures, lockers and most importantly the proper ventilation of the practice rooms. New equipment was also ordered including several new pianos for the practice rooms, a new Hi Fi Bogen portable record player for the choral room, and new furniture for the lounge-lobby. The project's total cost was \$27,424.11, approximately \$3,000 under original estimates. Both Music Department and college officials were pleased with the



work. One administrator noted: "The usable space has been increased considerably and our maintenance problems have been reduced to a minimum."<sup>46</sup>

Although the music department was building an enviable reputation, its Orchestra was going through difficult times. The appreciation for classical music both on and off campus seemed to be waning, and conductors often found it challenging to adequately man the orchestra for concert performances. The Orchestra photograph in the 1960 *Talisman* shows only 25 members and some of these are easily recognized as faculty members. No doubt this number was supplemented by community members for concerts, but this still represented a precipitous decline in student participation from previous decades. The orchestra continued to perform, but it fell back into its role of providing accompaniment to Western's choral groups, which were enjoying unprecedented success. Thomas J. Stone, Music Department head in 1959 admitted to a reviewer from the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) that the Orchestra had fallen on difficult times: "The orchestra...is in the process of rebuilding and may warrant being called a weak organization. However, the 'victim' seems to be recovering from near-extinction with the enrollment this semester of four cellists, three violists, and one violinist, all new non-music majors." Conversely Stone crowed: "This department offers no apologies for its choir, chorus, and band, which are excellent performing organizations and under most capable directors."<sup>47</sup> Despite the Orchestra's poor report, Stone was

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<sup>46</sup> Billy S. Smith to G.F. Beckler, 17 Feb. 1959, Box 40, Folder 12, Dero Downing Papers, UA.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas J. Stone to Thomas W. Williams, 29 Sept. 1959, Box 17, Folder 20, Kelly Thompson Papers, UA; Stone served as head of the music department from 1958 until 1965. He came to Western from Eastern Kentucky University where he served on the music faculty from 1935 to 1957. He earned a doctorate in music education from the University of Florida. President Kelly Thompson charged Stone with "reorganization in the music curricula" and "the remodeling and renovation of the Music Building. He left Western in 1965 to assume a faculty position at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He died in March 1968.

notified soon thereafter that the school had been promoted to full membership in NASM, representing another signal achievement for the Department.<sup>48</sup>

The 1960s was not a stellar decade for Western's Orchestra. Participation was at a low not seen since the World War II years, but the decade ended on an upswing:

1960	25	1965	34
1961	23	1966	35
1962	16	1967	not recorded
1963	24	1968	29
1964	21	1969	50

Any number of reasons could have contributed to these low numbers. One could surmise that there was general rebellion in the youth culture of the era against ensconced authority, and many might have considered classical music part of "the establishment." Another reason might be the number of other avenues for music majors, and particularly non-music majors, to participate in music activities. New choirs, instrumental ensembles and performance bands were initiated in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition two new musical fraternities were organized: Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia (for men; founded by Bennie Beach) and Delta Omicron (for women; founded by Gertrude Bale). Another reason the Orchestra may have experienced some difficulties was the Bowling Green Community Concert Association, which existed from the mid-1950s through 1971. This community organization raised funds to employ a national talent agency called Community Concerts, Inc. which brought significant artists of all types to Bowling

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<sup>48</sup> *Courier-Journal*, 30 November 1959.

Green. Western played a significant role in maintaining the organization. Each year, Western's financial contribution made up a major percentage of the Association's budget. Western also allowed the Association to utilize Van Meter Auditorium for their programming. In exchange, Western students were granted free admission to the events. Community Concerts, Inc. proclaimed the series "a wonderful opportunity for the town and gown to enjoy something really fine."<sup>49</sup>

The *Talismans* of the era featured the Community Concert series, and students typically made up a good portion of the audience, particularly in the 1960s. Each season generally included an orchestral or large instrumental ensemble performance. After a performance by the St. Louis Symphony in March 1962, the president of the Association noted that there were "only a handful of vacant seats" in Van Meter and "the audience response almost shook the auditorium."<sup>50</sup> Another potential reason for the slump in Orchestra participation in this period may have been the frequent changes in the conductor; four different faculty members led the organization during the 1960s. Another possible reason was the fact that students were only given a half-hour credit for participation in the Orchestra rather than the full hour previously awarded. This would have been particularly detrimental to non-music majors who might take the Orchestra class for both personal enjoyment and for credit hours.

Despite its low numbers the Orchestra continued to accompany Western's growing choral program and occasionally performed solo concerts. One major accompanying role occurred in May 1962 when the Orchestra played for the presentation of Gabriel Faure's *Requiem* given by the Western Chorus in Van Meter Auditorium. Later

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<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Schary to Kelly Thompson, 16 Apr. 1958, Box 17, Folder 2, Kelly Thompson Papers, UA.

<sup>50</sup> H.L. Olyniec to Kelly Thompson, 30 Mar. 1962, Box 17, Folder 2, Kelly Thompson Papers, UA.

in the decade, Dr. Russell Pugh joined the music faculty and was charged with re-building the Orchestra. He had taught for thirteen years at Kansas State College and had just received his doctorate from the University of Arkansas. The Orchestra is absent from the 1967 *Talisman*, and the group does not appear to have given a concert that year. In March 1968, the Western Kentucky University Orchestra presented a concert of Brahms and Haydn compositions, *Sinfonietta* by Gordon Jacob and *Four Movements for Chamber Orchestra* by Phillip Rhodes. This continued an old practice at Western of balancing material from the traditional symphonic repertoire with pieces by newer composers. When Dr. Pugh left Western in 1969, he had built the Orchestra up to 50 players.

Two other important things occurred in the 1960s that affected the Orchestra. The more significant of the two was the Board of Regents's approval in August 1967 of a Master's degree in Music. A Master's in Music Education had been offered since 1961. Graduate courses first appeared in the 1968-69 catalog. This increased the Music Department's prestige, created a whole new cadre of students from which the Orchestra could draw, led to increases in the number of faculty, and led to the enlargement of the library's music holdings. A more devastating event happened in the early morning hours of December 5, 1965, when a fire caused extensive damage to the Music Building. The fire started in a ground floor storage room. A fire wall and "fire ceiling" helped keep the conflagration contained to the southern two-story wing. Pianos in the practice rooms and instruments, some owned by students, were destroyed; choir robes and sundry equipment were damaged by water and smoke. Fire officials estimated damages at nearly \$100,000. The fire's cause was not immediately known, but within two weeks a former Western music student was arrested and charged with setting the blaze. He was also charged with

starting five other small fires in Bowling Green, including two earlier ones in the Music Building. Repairs were made quickly with only minor disruption to classes.<sup>51</sup>

The upswing in student participation at the end of the 1960s poised the Orchestra to make some important changes as it entered a new decade. In 1969 Western hired David Darling, who was a cellist with the Nashville Symphony Orchestra, as a faculty member in the Music Department with responsibilities for conducting the Orchestra. The following year, Darling announced the newly organized Western Kentucky University-Bowling Green Community Orchestra. Honestly, the university group needed the support of the community's musicians. Local instrumentalists had played with Western's Orchestra since its inception, but this was the first official recognition of their importance. For a March 1970 concert, Darling noted that the Orchestra consisted of sixty members composed of forty Western faculty and students and twenty community players or professional musicians hired to make up deficiencies in the Orchestra, particularly in the strings area. Darling called the organization of the University-Community symphony a "significant accomplishment" in the cultural life of the surrounding area. The symphony, Darling pronounced would concentrate on classical and traditional pieces in future concerts, and he indicated that leaders of the principal sections of the ensemble were headed by professional artists of the Western music faculty and by virtuoso community artists. This again paid tribute to the community's participation. Faculty member Betty Pease served as the concertmaster. The March concert included

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<sup>51</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 5 Dec. 1965, 17 Dec. 1965.

Franz Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* as well as two twentieth century pieces by Moussorgsky and Sibelius.<sup>52</sup>

At that March 1970 concert, Benjamin Woodruff was listed as assistant conductor, and he soon assumed full responsibility for the Orchestra. An oboist and professor of double reed instruments, Woodruff obtained his doctorate from the University of Illinois and came to Western in 1969 from Texas Tech University. He began conducting the Orchestra in October 1970 and continued in that role for five years. When Woodruff premiered with the Orchestra, fellow faculty member Dr. Edward Thaden performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major. Most of Woodruff's concerts concentrated on traditional selections from the symphonic repertoire, and many of these concerts featured the WKU Choral Union or WKU Chorus. These concerts were held on Sunday afternoons in Van Meter Auditorium and music lovers attended for free. In 1973, the concerts migrated to Thursday evenings. A highlight of the Woodruff years was a combined Orchestra and Choral Union concert in December 1973 in which Handel's *Messiah* was performed. Attendees referred to it as "stirring", and it began a tradition of holding a holiday concert in early December.<sup>53</sup>

The Orchestra's baton was handed to Leon Gregorian in 1976. Gregorian also served as conductor of the Owensboro Symphony; he had been artist-in-residence at Kentucky Wesleyan College and Brescia College. Little changed for the Orchestra under Gregorian's leadership. It continued to select standard symphonic works for performance and played two major concerts a year. After leaving Western, Gregorian went on to

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<sup>52</sup> Office of Public Affairs and Public Relations press released, 12 Mar. 1970, Box 40, Folder 13, Dero Downing Papers, UA; *Talisman* 1970

<sup>53</sup> Holiday concerts had been performed for a number of years from the 1920s to the 1940s, but this had been discontinued. The tradition established in 1973 has continued with few interruptions since that time. The Thaden concert was featured in the *Park City Daily News* 30 Oct. 1970.

become professor of music and conductor of the Michigan State University Orchestra. After the demise of the Community Concert Association, the University began to fund a Fine Arts Series that continued to bring outstanding artists to campus for performances. Classical music aficionados and students enjoyed several concerts given on WKU's campus by internationally recognized orchestras during the 1970s: the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in April 1975, the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra in February 1977, the Louisville Orchestra in March 1978, and the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra in 1979. These concerts were well attended and enjoyed by students and townsfolk. On a surviving program in the WKU Archives, a person who attended the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra concert expressed his reaction to the concert: "Marvelous!"<sup>54</sup>

Two other things affecting the Orchestra and the WKU Music Department should be noted from the 1970s. The 1970 university catalog announced that "string players are required to be in the orchestra and instrumental majors had to be in band and might be required for orchestra." This strengthened the faculty's ability to tap certain collegiate musicians for the Orchestra. Another eventful day in the music department was their move into the Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center in May 1973. Although giving up some space, the faculty and students were pleased to be in a new building that offered more modern practice facilities and an adequate recital hall. The music department faculty participated in planning the new structure. The recital hall was not large enough for Orchestra performances, so they continued to be scheduled in Van Meter Auditorium. Administrators studied new uses for the old Music Building which had been erected in

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<sup>54</sup> This program is found in "Programs" box (UA1A) in a folder marked "Programs-Music-Band/Orchestra."

the late-1930s. They eventually determined that the building did not merit renovation, and it was razed in the fall of 1976.<sup>55</sup>

Faced with severe budget cuts at WKU in 1981, administrators eliminated funding for the Orchestra. After a brief hiatus, the Orchestra was revived in early 1982. Gary Dilworth, a trumpet professor at Western assumed the position of conductor. Dilworth had a Master's degree from the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music. He had been a free-lance musician in the Cincinnati area and an instructor at Northern Kentucky University prior to coming to Western. Besides serving as the Orchestra's conductor, he was the principal trumpet in the Owensboro Symphony Orchestra. Dilworth was diligent in seeking out local talent to fill empty seats. In 1982 the group's name was shortened to Bowling Green Western Symphony Orchestra (BGWSO). Aided by a small grant from the Kentucky Arts Council and local contributions, Dilworth and other local supporters planned a four-concert season for the 1982-83 season. The BGWSO's premier concert was planned for October 18, 1982; it took place in the newly remodeled Capitol Arts Center and featured violinist Lenore Hatfield. This was the first concert under the BGWSO aegis in which tickets were sold: \$2 for students; \$4 for adults. Those wishing to make additional contributions could do so at the patron level, \$25, or be a benefactor at \$100. It was clear that the Orchestra was being more entrepreneurial in order to make ends meet, but a more sophisticated means of fundraising was necessary to secure the group's future.<sup>56</sup>

In 1984 two articles appeared in the local paper detailing the budgetary woes of the Orchestra. "When I took over the orchestra two years ago," Dilworth explained, "I

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<sup>55</sup> *Western Kentucky University Catalog*, 1970; *College Heights Herald*, 26 Sept. 1975.

<sup>56</sup> *Bowling Green Magazine* (Fall/Winter 1983): 37.



had a grand budget of zero. We've come a long way, but our biggest problem is that we're a struggling organization that doesn't have a lot of money." Dilworth noted that the chief expense for the Orchestra was hiring outside string players. For the first concert of the 1983-84 season, the conductor had to supplement the thirty-one Western students and faculty members with nineteen string players which cost the Orchestra \$3,245; Dilworth estimated this expense at \$5.11 per minute. Since no nearby Kentucky schools had string programs, most of the musicians were hired from the Nashville area. To preclude this problem, Dr. Dwight Pounds, a viola instructor at WKU, preached: "Strong consideration needs to be placed on a strings program in the city and county schools. With encouragement of our young people to play stringed instruments, this will give us string players in the years to come." Dilworth went on to explain that the Orchestra was good for everyone. For students, it provided a valuable learning experience, both in the music played and by their association with their professors and professional instrumentalists. For the faculty it was a performance venue and an opportunity to be a part of Bowling Green's music scene. For the community, Dilworth asserted that the Orchestra provided "a cultural source of entertainment and that it's good for business. Not having an orchestra is like having a city that has no museum or no arts." Financial assistance was necessary for the Orchestra's survival. After each concert Dilworth pondered whether there would be another. During the 1984 season, Dilworth admitted that the Orchestra was still in its infancy, but he was pleased with the progress being made. Of the BGWSO's last concert of the 1983-84 season, Dilworth noted: "It's not going to sound like the St. Louis Symphony, but of course my players aren't getting

\$27,000-\$35,000 a year salary either. I think it will be very respectable. I'm not ashamed to get up on the podium and stand in front of the band, so to speak."<sup>57</sup>

Dilworth was the figure head for the Orchestra, but every organization needs a community champion, particularly in its fledgling years. The BGWSO champion of this era was Dr. Jerry Cohron, a Warren County native and an established local veterinarian. Cohron held a leadership position with the Orchestra Council and was instrumental in stirring up local interest in the BGWSO and in helping obtain financial contributions and sponsorships. Cohron was particularly interested in making sure that the Orchestra maintained its community identity. "There's always going to be a place for our Bowling Green and Western residents to give an orchestra-quality performance. This is our hometown stage. As I read it, this is part of our charge."<sup>58</sup> The Orchestra Council's organization was fluid at best, but it did provide some guidance to the conductor. The time was soon approaching for a more formal structure for the BGWSO's governance both fiscally and artistically.

In 1986 the Orchestra Council invited Nashvillian musical consultant Sandra Wicarson to Bowling Green in order to seek her advice on the best way to proceed with the Orchestra's development. She presented a report that praised the community's interest in the Orchestra, but highlighted several important things that would improve the organization's structure and its standing in Bowling Green. She suggested that the BGWSO incorporate and officially seek status as a non-profit organization. This would necessitate the drafting of a mission statement, articles of incorporation, and by-laws. She also recommended an increase in the number of board members and the formation of

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<sup>57</sup> *Park City Daily News*, Apr. 17 and Oct. 28, 1984.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

standing committees: nominating, budget, long-range planning, and fundraising.

Formalizing relations with the University and with the local chamber of commerce were also highly recommended. Wicarson firmly suggested that the board set policy not the conductor; he should enjoy artistic freedom within certain parameters established by the board.

Wicarson acknowledged in her report that string players were foundational to a great symphony orchestra. She highly suggested more intense recruitment in the community for players who could utilize their talents in the Orchestra. They in turn would generate community support for the organization. She noted that until the Orchestra could field more string players, they would be limited in the pieces they could publicly perform. Wayne Hobbs, head of Western's Music Department at the time, bemoaned the lack of a proper strings program. In 1985, the university had two string faculty members who played in the Orchestra as concertmaster and as principal violist; an adjunct faculty member played the double bass. Ashamedly, only two strings students from the university played with the Orchestra at the time. This small number did not escape Wicarson's notice, and she wisely suggested that the University find some way to shore up its strings program. She also noted the frustration expressed by community members that local players were displaced by paid professionals. This issue needed to be addressed in a delicate case-by-case basis, and it is a situation familiar to most community orchestras. No easy solutions exist for such situations.<sup>59</sup>

Under a new president, Martha Haynes, the Orchestra's board went about fulfilling some of the suggestions made in Wicarson's report. The board had already filed

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<sup>59</sup> "Consultation with Bowling Green-Western Symphony Orchestra," prepared by Sandra Wicarson, Sept. 8, 1986. Found in the files at the BGWSO office.

Articles of Incorporation with the Kentucky Secretary of State in March 1986. It submitted paperwork for 501(c)(3) non-profit status with the Internal Revenue Service in the same year. The organization's purpose, as stated in the new by-laws, was the promotion of "music, dance, arts and other cultural activities for enhancement of the social welfare of the community and to thereby provide educational and instructional benefits to both individuals and the community."<sup>60</sup> To help fulfill this mission, the board began facilitating long range planning for the organization and continued to broaden its base of financial support.

While the board dealt with these organizational matters, WKU's Music Department hired Christopher S. Norton to conduct the Orchestra, teach music theory, and establish a percussion studio. Norton possessed a Master's degree in music theory from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. He came to Bowling Green from Baton Rouge, where he was pursuing a doctorate in music at Louisiana State University. He performed in the percussion section for the Baton Rouge Symphony, and his wife played French horn for the New Orleans Symphony.

Once on campus, Norton quickly held auditions to determine the level of local talent available, particularly in the strings area. He and the board agreed that using local musicians would provide more continuity for the Orchestra and preclude hiring a large number of professionals. "It's great to be able to hire professionals," surmised Norton, "because they know the music and they only need one rehearsal, but if we develop our own talents, some of what we pay them can be used to make more rehearsals possible. I'm talking about full-orchestra rehearsals; it makes a big difference in the quality of the

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<sup>60</sup> "Articles of Incorporation of Bowling Green-Western Symphony Orchestra, Inc.," Mar. 3, 1986. Found in the files at the BGWSO office.

performance."<sup>61</sup> Wicarson had noted in her report that rehearsals without the professional strings component were "frustrating and less productive. Morale has to be an ongoing problem in this situation." Norton enjoyed working with students and knew that for some of them the BGWSO might "be their only orchestral experience. It's important that we use as many students as we can and use the rehearsals not only to rehearse for a concert, but to teach them new concepts and ideas."<sup>62</sup> A young and energetic leader, Norton's premier concert with the BGWSO took place on October 25th, 1987 in Van Meter Auditorium with 59 players; the program included Berlioz's *Hungarian March* from *The Damnation of Faust*, Bizet's *Carmen* Suite No. 1 and Dvorak's "Symphony No. 8 in G Major." Tickets for the concert sold for \$5, or music lovers could purchase a three-concert season ticket for \$12.

Keeping ticket prices low was important to the Orchestra's governing body, and it's leadership soon realized that fundraising was paramount to keep the new organization afloat fiscally. They immediately sought concert underwriting with some degree of success. Norton estimated that each symphony performance cost \$5000 to produce. Ticket proceeds and underwriting were not adequate to meet those costs. One of the board's early fundraisers that met with community support was an annual book sale that lasted for three years. Norton helped in promoting this and other fundraising activities. "The role of the music director," Norton candidly admitted, "involves PR [public relations]. It's part of the job. I don't know why it has to be stuffy."<sup>63</sup> This comment referred to a rather comical television commercial that featured Norton promoting the book sale.

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<sup>61</sup> *Park City Daily News*, June 12, 1987.

<sup>62</sup> WKU press release dated Oct. 20, 1987, found in "Christopher Norton" biography file in UA.

<sup>63</sup> *Park City Daily News*, Oct. 4, 1987.

BGWSO's evolution increased speedily during the 1988-89 season. This momentum first manifested itself in the pre-season mailer that was professionally designed. It listed a series of four concerts: two were classical in nature, one was for children, and the other a Valentine Pops event. A children's concert helped flesh out another suggestion made by the consultant in 1986 that the Orchestra include an educational component in their mission and in their season of concerts. The BGWSO included another of the consultant's suggestions when they announced a young artist concerto competition open to instrumentalists enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Students submitted cassette tapes of themselves performing a piece; the best ones were called to play in person for the adjudicators. For the 1988-89 season, the Orchestra also raised its individual ticket price to \$15 for adults and \$7.50 for students. Opportunities were also made on the ticket order form for patrons to make additional donations to the Orchestra. During this season, the Orchestra also made the Capitol Arts Center their home for performances. Its stage was smaller than the one at Van Meter Auditorium, but it had a new sound system and most importantly more parking was available for the convenience of concert goers. The Orchestra also wanted to support this new performing arts venue in Bowling Green. The end of the 1980s was a pivotal time in BGWSO's development. The governance system was formalized, the artistic element and leadership was stabilized, its outreach component was broadened, and its size grew.

As the BGWSO entered the 1990s, it was poised to enjoy a decade of continued stability and momentum. One exciting moment during the new decade occurred at a themed concert entitled "Premiere Performances" when the Orchestra gave a world premier performance of its first commissioned piece. This act demonstrated the

Orchestra's evolving maturity. "We're pretty healthy in terms of financial support and community support," reasoned Norton, but "in terms of programming, the question is how are you going to come up with a program that will interest the audience and still educate the students?" He explained that debuting a musical piece allows students, professionals, and community players in the Orchestra to creatively interpret a score that has never been played before. "If other orchestras want to play it," Norton surmised, "the composer will say 'here's a recording of the Bowling Green Western Symphony. This is what it's supposed to sound like.'" Michael Kallstrom, a professor of music at WKU, wrote the piece entitled *Towers and Spires*, and he was pleased with the Orchestra's interpretation. At the same concert the Orchestra presented Johannes Brahms's Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90, the first Brahms symphony played by the Bowling Green group in twenty years.<sup>64</sup> The following year, the Orchestra hosted a concert with Larry Gatlin, a popular country and western singer, at the WKU Agricultural Exposition Center. This was followed with a "Pops Parade" concert in 1993 and an intriguing concert in which the Orchestra played music from the 1925 movie version of *Phantom of the Opera* as the audience watched the film.

Christopher Norton remained as conductor of the Orchestra through the 1994-95 concert season; having the same conductor for eight years created more stability for the musicians and the organization than anything else.<sup>65</sup> Based on this firm foundation the board was able to pursue further financial support for the organization both through underwriting and private donations. Other areas that indicated the group's emerging prosperity including the adoption of an attractive new logo during the 1993-94 season

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<sup>64</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 15 Nov. 1991.

<sup>65</sup> Norton became a professor of music at Nashville's Belmont University Conservatory of Music in 2001.

featuring a violin scroll and peg box, the printing of season tickets by the Capitol Arts Center, a classic new design for concert programs which were filled with sponsor ads, and slow but sure growth in physical numbers of players and in concert attendance.

Norton stepped down as the Orchestra's conductor before the 1995-96 season, and Dr. John A. Duff accepted the baton on an "interim" basis. Duff had been the head of the WKU Music Department since 1991. He possessed a Master's and Doctorate of Music from Michigan State University. He came to Bowling Green from Fairbanks, Alaska, where he had taught for eleven years at the University of Alaska. What began as an interim conductor position for Duff actually lasted five years. The Orchestra continued to mature, and in the 1996-97 season, the Bowling Green Western Chamber Orchestra was introduced to local audiences at two different concerts sponsored by the Orchestra. When the BGWSO's 90th season began in 1998, the group numbered 70 players. Duff announced that the entire season's concerts would be played at the Capitol Arts Center rather than moving from church to church as it had done over the past few years. The Orchestra also purchased a portable band shell which helped "project the sound from stage" toward the audience. Things looked rosy for the Orchestra, particularly financially. Duff noted: "We have grown in individual support, especially in the last year or so. I hope it continues."

Duff's wish came true the following year, when local arts supporter, Jerry Baker, gave WKU \$500,000 that was matched by Kentucky's Regional University Excellence Trust fund to create a \$1 million endowed professorship for a strings instructor. This professor would be in charge of recruiting and teaching strings students at Western as well as serving as music director and conductor for the BGWSO. At the time that the



donation was made, Western was providing string instruction to only ten students, yet this was the highest number since the mid-1980s. David Lee, Dean of WKU's Potter College, predicted: "With the further success of this orchestra [BGWSO] and the leadership this professorship will bring, this number is expected to increase." The new instructor would also be responsible for coordinating a strings program in local public and private schools. Similar programs had met with great success across the country, and it was believed that a program of this nature would benefit BGWSO in the future. "This marvelous gift will have a monumental impact on the quality of cultural life at Western and throughout the Bowling Green community," surmised Gary Ransdell, Western's president. "Seldom can one professorship fill so many different needs," added Ransdell. "It enhances our music curriculum even for students on other instruments. It influences every aspect of quality in the music department." BGWSO conductor and WKU Music Department head, John Duff, surmised that the gift was a direct result of the orchestra's high quality. "I don't think that the donation would have been made," he said, "if the department and the orchestra hadn't proven themselves." Duff said a search committee would be appointed that fall, and he hoped that the new position would be filled by the fall of 2000.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately things did not move as quickly as desired, and the BGWSO's conducting responsibility for the five-concert 2000-01 season was divided between three Music Department faculty members: Ronnie Oliver, John Carmichael, and former conductor, Christopher Norton. The season continued the popular Holiday Pops concert and a classical concert featuring Mozart pieces; the other concerts were more thematic: "American Celebration", "Continental Crossings", and "Orquesta Festiva", which

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<sup>66</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 29 Jan. 1999; *College Heights Herald*, 9 Feb. 1999.

included Latin-influenced works. All concerts were held at the Capitol Arts Center except for the Mozart concert which also featured the Bowling Green Western Choral Society; it was held at First Baptist Church to accommodate the large number of musicians involved. In the middle of the 2000-01 season, a dedicated friend of the BGWSO and former conductor, John Duff, moved to San Marcos, Texas to accept a position as head of the Music Department at Southwest Texas State University.<sup>67</sup> In a letter to the editor, BGWSO's president, Susan Pribble, lauded the musician's work: "Dr. Duff volunteered his services as conductor of the orchestra. His dedication as a musician and as a teacher and mentor called him to work as conductor, music and artistic director, and board member [of the BGWSO] without monetary compensation. In short, he did it because he loves music and believes in sharing his music with others for the sheer pleasure of the experience."<sup>68</sup> He had indeed served the Orchestra well.

At this time, Susan Pribble's term as president of BGWSO ended, but her service did not, as she began her tenure as the volunteer Executive Director of the BGWSO. During this time, the BGWSO's fundraising efforts and educational outreach grew exponentially. Through a gift from the Laura Goad Turner Foundation and the efforts of Susan Pribble, the BGWSO was able to expand its educational outreach in Bowling Green, Warren County, and Allen County, providing school day orchestra performances for students and providing jazz, opera, and other musical performances to individual classes. Pribble's praise of John Duff could equally be used to describe her service to the BGWSO: she had indeed served the Orchestra well.

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<sup>67</sup> This is now Texas State University.

<sup>68</sup> Letter to the editor sent by Pribble, *Park City Daily News*, 14 July 2000.

The year 2000 also saw the introduction of another ensemble that played classical music, the Bowling Green Chamber Orchestra. Many Bowling Greeners, asked if this community could support two significant classical music organizations. Heidi Huddleston, president of the BGWSO in 2001, set the record straight by publishing in *Symphony Notes* a short article prepared by Lee Stott, Music Director of Western's Public Radio, in which he described the differences between a Chamber Orchestra and a Symphony Orchestra. Stott concluded: "There always has been and continues to be plenty of room for both the larger symphony orchestra and the smaller chamber ensemble. They complement and enhance each other. Bowling Green is fortunate to have both."<sup>69</sup> This public declaration that both groups could not only survive but thrive did much to temper the talk that the groups were actually competitors.

In the summer of 2001, the BGWSO announced the appointment of its new conductor, Jooyong Ahn, just in time for him to conduct the 2001-02 season. Concurrently he began teaching string technique classes at Western. He came to Bowling Green from Chungnam National University in Taejon, South Korea, and had formerly served as music director for the Taejon Philharmonic Orchestra and the Slippery Rock Symphony Orchestra in Pennsylvania. In addition he had served as guest conductor for orchestras worldwide. On September 20, 2001, Ahn conducted the Orchestra for the first time at Van Meter Auditorium in a concert featuring Verdi's Overture to *La Forza del Destino* and Weber's Concertino for Orchestra and Clarinet. After the concert, Ahn effused: "I dearly enjoyed the audience...[which] was first class and I felt a very warm welcoming throughout the evening. I have a strong feeling that there will be a long and

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<sup>69</sup> *Symphony Notes*, Nov./Dec. 2001.

wonderful journey between the audience and myself.”<sup>70</sup> The feeling of admiration was mutual, as the audience enjoyed the way the silver-maned musician led the orchestra. One audience member wrote of the performance: “The orchestra was brilliant, and at the conclusion, Maestro Ahn and the orchestra received three standing ovations.”<sup>71</sup> Attendees were also delighted by the Orchestra’s animated concertmaster, Stanislav Antonevich.

The rest of the 2001-02 season was just as memorable. In late-October, the Orchestra premiered a ballet composed by Sylvia Kersenbaum entitled *Masque of the Red Death*. A long-time piano instructor at WKU, Kersenbaum served as featured soloist for the evening. Western faculty members, Steven Stone and Lees Harris, choreographed the ballet, and students of Western’s Department of Theater and Dance executed the program. Ahn’s wife and professional bassoonist, Dong-yun Kwon, performed Weber’s Bassoon Concerto in F-Major for the season finale in April with the Orchestra; the evening was capped with Orff’s popular *Carmina Burana*. The artistic programming and execution of the 2001-02 season was matched by a hardworking board who revised the organization’s by-laws. The new mission statement declared that its chief purpose was “to advance music literacy, to provide a symphony orchestra of the highest quality, and to be a focus for musical excellence.” The board also initiated a newsletter entitled *Symphony Notes*, which kept season subscribers informed about the organization’s activities.

Ahn led the BGWSO through another successful season in 2002-03. The first concert commemorated the somber anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy in which New York City’s World Trade Center and the Pentagon were bombed; the program included

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<sup>70</sup> *Symphony Notes*, Oct. 2001. *Symphony Notes* premiered with the October 2001 issue.

<sup>71</sup> Letter to the editor from David Dickson, *Park City Daily News*, 27 Sept. 2001.

Williams Schuman's *American Festival Overture*, a solid performance of Samuel's Jones's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and a beautiful rendition of Virgil Thomson's *Symphony on a Hymn Tune*. After this concert, the local paper in an editorial entitled "Orchestra is Moving Toward Higher Level", said: "Conductor Jooyong Ahn and the BGWSO got off to a heroic start Thursday night at Van Meter Auditorium. The only thing missing was an encore, which was surprising considering the enthusiasm of the audience." The Orchestra did seem to possess a momentum that seemed destined to take it to a "higher level."<sup>72</sup> This successful performance was matched by an October concert that featured guest pianist Sae Hee Kim playing a passionate rendition of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto. The Holiday Pops and the Valentine Evening of Romance concerts were followed by the choral spectacular in April. By the 2002-03 season, a routine had developed for the season concerts. The months in which concerts were played has remained constant since that time, and the December concert remains the Christmas Pops concert ; the April concert always includes the Bowling Green Western Choral Society. Musical works for concerts in other months are generally selected around a central theme.

BGWSO subscribers lamented the fact that Ahn was leaving at the end of the 2002-03 season to become director of a newly formed ballet company called the Atlantic Southeast Ballet, but they welcomed the new conductor, William Scott of Spartanburg, South Carolina, with open arms. Scott boasted a Doctorate in Music Arts degree in Orchestral Conducting from the University of South Carolina. He had just retired from a career in public school education when he heard about the position at Western. In Spartanburg, Scott had served as the orchestra coordinator for a large school district, where strings enrollment had increased 22% during his tenure. In addition Scott had

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<sup>72</sup> *Park City Daily News*, 22 Sept. 2002.

served eight years as music director and conductor of the professional Greater Spartanburg Philharmonic. Besides his orchestral work, Scott had also initiated and conducted opera programming in South Carolina's public schools in cooperation with the University of South Carolina Opera Theater. This combination of Scott's professional orchestral work and public education background made him a natural to fulfill the mission of the endowed professorship at WKU and to fulfill the community's desire to initiate a strings program in the public and private schools.

Scott began his duties with fervor and conducted a memorable premier season with the Orchestra which included two classical concerts, a Harry Potter theme concert, the traditional Holiday Pops and the dual concert with the Bowling Green Western Choral Society. The BGWSO also added a three-concert chamber series in 2002 that allowed for a more intimate musical experience.

Under Scott's leadership, the Orchestra has continued to strengthen its base of support both financially and in attendance. Since assuming his position, attendance has increased 12% at concerts and the Orchestra itself has held steady at 70 members. The Orchestra has maintained several successful fundraising projects including a black tie ball, and the group has done well in finding underwriting for concerts. Scott has continued the concept of themed concerts, illustrating how classical music finds itself in every facet of our lives from movies, to commercials, to religion, to cartoons. Also under Scott's direction, the BGWSO and WKU have introduced a strings programs in several local schools that has created a great deal of excitement and positive publicity. Since 1997 WKU has also been successful in soliciting donations for scholarships for students who play in the Orchestra; today over 10 named scholarships are currently available. In

addition several endowed funds have been established for the long-term benefit of the BGWSO. Due to the Orchestra's recent success, Joan Wulff was hired as Executive Secretary in 2006 to oversee the organization's continued growth and maintain its myriad activities.

In tribute to WKU's long-standing support of the BGWSO, the organization took an active role in the University's centennial celebration in 2006. At its April 2006 concert at First Baptist Church, the Orchestra performed a world premier of Michael Kallstrom's "One Song Far Away" for the Bowling Green community. The piece was commissioned for the Centennial by Allan and Susan Pribble, long-time supporters of the Orchestra. The BGWSO also sponsored two run-out concerts that year, one in Elizabethtown and the other in Owensboro.

As the Bowling Green Western Symphony Orchestra celebrates its centennial, it stands in a very healthy position. For generations musicians—students, townspeople, WKU faculty, and professionals—have melded their talents to produce quality concerts for an eager public. The venues have changed, the musicians have changed, the music has changed, the conductors have changed, but the end product—beautiful orchestral music—has remained a constant. Today the BGWSO serves as a model of cooperation and financial stability for symphony orchestras in similar-sized communities across America. The next one hundred years certainly holds great promise for this important arts organization.

